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Hanson Edward Ely

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Hanson Edward Ely

“Battalion, attention!”

The cadets at the State University of Iowa stood rigid, heels together and eyes front. Many of them noticed, that afternoon in April, 1897, that Commandant Vogdes was accompanied by a tall athletic soldier wearing the uniform of a lieutenant in the regular infantry. Apparently the visitor was not a stranger, for several people greeted him as a former acquaintance. The officer was Hanson E. Ely, once a resident of Iowa City and recently detailed as military instructor at the University upon the request of the Board of Regents.

Ed Ely, as he was familiarly known among his boyhood friends, was born at Independence, Iowa, on November 3, 1867. While still a student in Iowa City High School he had joined the local national guard company. Perhaps that experience confirmed his desire for a military career, for in March, 1886, he took the competitive examination for admission to West Point and was appointed in 1887.

At the Military Academy he had the honor of being color corporal the second year and color sergeant the third year. Always aggressive, he excelled in the belligerent sports of boxing and football, though the lessons in discipline and tactics were not neglected. Having graduated into the army as a

second lieutenant in 1891, he was assigned to the Twenty-second Infantry and reported for duty at Fort Keogh in Montana. An expedition to quell a labor riot in Idaho, a little Indian fighting, guard duty at the World's Fair in Chicago, an exploratory trip in the upper Roseau River region, rifle competition, and garrison duty filled the years between 1891 and 1897.

Lieutenant Ely enthusiastically accepted the assignment as commandant at the University and organized the work with his customary dispatch. By the end of October the battalion was ready for dress parade. A "thorough soldier, both in appearance and manner", he so completely won the respect and aroused the patriotism of the students that the whole battalion volunteered for active service in the war with Spain and elected him unanimously for their major. When Governor Shaw refused to accept the University battalion, Lieutenant Ely assisted in the organization of a volunteer battery which was also rejected. Early in May he was appointed mustering officer for South Dakota troops.

The Spanish-American War ended before the Twenty-second Infantry was needed at the front, but in January, 1899, the regiment, having been assembled at Fort Crook, was ordered to the Philippines. During the first year in the Far East, Lieutenant Ely was attached to the service of supply, being regimental and brigade quartermaster and acting commissary of subsistence for the Third Brigade

of the First Division. Again, for nearly a year after July, 1900, he was depot commissary for the Department of Northern Luzon. It was valuable experience, the full importance of which was to be realized many years later on the battle fields of France. Nor was his Philippine service entirely behind the lines. For gallantry in action at Tuliahan River on March 25, 1899, he was authorized to wear a silver star on the ribbon of his Philippine Campaign medal. During the spring of 1900 he had the honor of commanding General Funston's famous Mounted Scouts.

Having been made a captain in the Twenty-sixth Infantry on February 2, 1901, he returned to the United States and from October, 1901, to November, 1903, was regimental recruiting officer stationed at Des Moines. During the following year he commanded the First Battalion of his regiment in Texas, the next two years he attended the Infantry and Cavalry School and the Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, and in the fall of 1906 he was sent abroad to observe the German military maneuvers and study European armies. From 1907 to 1912 duty kept him in the Philippines. On March 11, 1913, he was promoted to the rank of major and two years later participated in the Vera Cruz expedition as a battalion and regimental commander.

Twenty-six years were required for Hanson E. Ely to win a commission as lieutenant colonel—twenty-six years of regular army routine, relieved

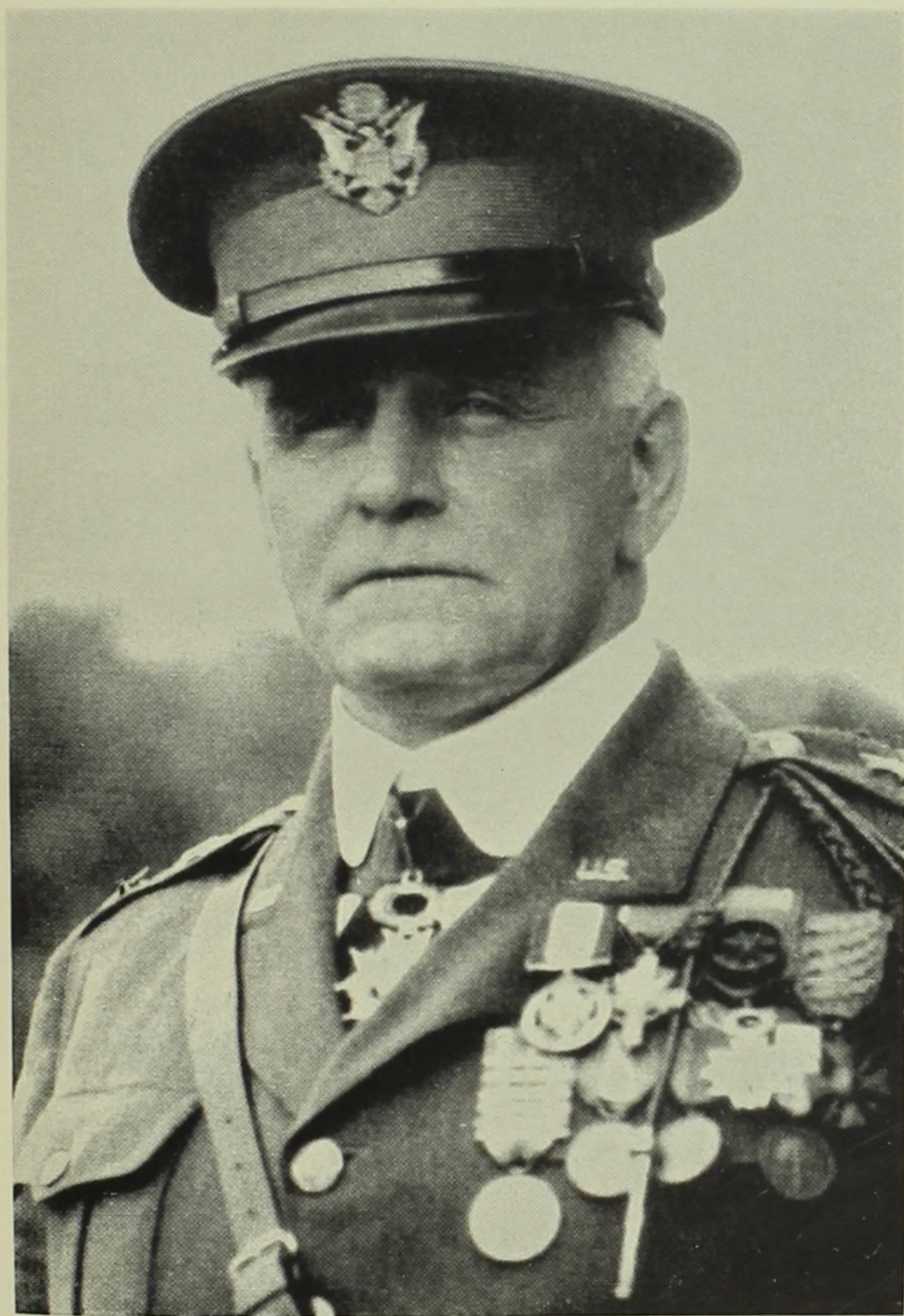
occasionally by marksmanship competition and summer maneuvers, by punitive expeditions and overseas service. He missed the fighting in the war with Spain and his part in suppressing the Philippine insurrection was confined almost entirely to staff duty. More than a quarter of a century of garrison life must have been irksome to a man of his energetic disposition.

Just after daybreak on the twenty-eighth of May, 1918, a heavy barrage rolled up the slopes toward the village of Cantigny on the Western Front. Behind the curtain of fire advanced three thin lines of storming troops in steady waves, bearing on their uniforms the insignia of the Twenty-eighth Infantry and the First American Division. With the precision of a practice maneuver, every unit went forward against the most strategic point won by the Germans in their swift advance into the valley of the Avre. Led by their company commanders, the men of the Twenty-eighth entered the town just as the bombardment ceased, exactly on time. The resistance of the enemy was stubborn, for the loss of Cantigny would endanger his whole line in the adjacent valley, but the Americans had no idea of being repulsed. On through the town they went, mopping up, and reached their objectives beyond at twenty minutes after seven. At seven thirty they outlined their position with flares and began digging in. Infuriated at being hurled from an important position by inexperienced troops, the enemy retaliated by concentra-

ting the full strength of his artillery against the town in a terrific bombardment that lasted three days. Every building in the place was leveled, and still the Americans clung to their shell holes, crushing five powerful counter-attacks with their deadly rifle and machine-gun fire.

To the Twenty-eighth Infantry — physically fit, well trained, and confident — had been given the honor of making the first American offensive in France. Much of the credit for the swift and decisive victory was due to the ability, aggressiveness, and dynamic character of Colonel Hanson E. Ely, who personally directed the attack, made quick decisions, and demonstrated his capacity for great physical endurance. In order to keep in touch with his troops he remained in an exposed position during the attack, "although shelled by enemy artillery, and made frequent trips of observation after the capture of Cantigny to better acquaint himself with the exact situation." For his daring and ability he was cited by Marshal Petain as a "brilliant soldier" who "infused in his Regiment the dash with which he is animated."

One of the first American officers to reach France, being a member of the mission sent in June, 1917, to study organization and tactics, he was transferred to the staff of the Commander-in-Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces on the request of General Pershing and appointed Provost Marshal General. In August, 1917, he became chief of staff of the



MAJOR GENERAL HANSON E. ELY

First Division, but in May, 1918, at his own request, he was assigned to the command of the Twenty-eighth Infantry. The Croix de Guerre, the honor of Officer of the Legion of Honor, and a commission as brigadier general in the national army were the rewards for his heroic rôle at Cantigny.

Having been assigned to the Third Brigade of the Second Division, General Ely took command just in time to participate in the mighty Soissons counter-offensive. In the new strategy, which substituted surprise for artillery preparation, the tired Second Division hurried into line during the pitch-dark, rainy night of July 17th, actually feeling its way into position. An hour before zero the attacking battalions had not arrived. But when the rolling barrage started with a crash at four thirty-five, the men of the Second Division were "there", though some of them had to catch their breath as they went over the top in the deliberate pace of the advance. Nevertheless, "in spite of three nights without sleep, long marches through rain and mud, shortage of food and water", Ely's brigade "advanced nine kilometers, captured over 2500 prisoners," and seized large quantities of supplies before being relieved.

By the end of the first day, according to the plan, headquarters of the Third Brigade were to be established at Vierzy. That evening when General Ely went forward the village had not been cleared of the enemy and he was fired upon at short range by machine guns. "At great personal risk", he or-

ganized and directed "an attack which resulted in the capture of the town and in the advance of the lines well beyond." According to the official citation for the Distinguished Service Cross, his "indomitable bravery, disregard for his own safety, devotion to his men and his presence with them in the front line, inspired them to deeds of great courage and enabled the troops to take the town despite strong enemy resistance made by vastly superior numbers."

Still with the Third Brigade, General Ely participated in the hard fighting at St. Mihiel in September and contributed "notably to the brilliant success at Blanc Mont Ridge" early in October. In the battle of St. Mihiel, his brigade, leading the attack, "broke through the enemy's fortified lines and advanced with such power and rapidity that it swept all opposition aside and was able to seize the bridges over the Rupt de Mad and occupy Thiaucourt, capturing over 3000 prisoners and 100 cannon." The second-day objectives were occupied before two o'clock on the first day, with less than four hundred casualties.

About two weeks later the brigade moved to the front again in the darkness of the night "over an unknown terrain, without guides, and in close proximity to the enemy," to storm the heights of Blanc Mont Ridge. Having carried the position, the brigade engaged in "one of the bitterest struggles of the war" to hold the ridge. Night and day for a week, constantly under intense artillery and ma-

chine-gun fire, Ely's men resisted the most persistent counter-attacks, "yielding not one inch of conquered ground." The losses were heavier than most troops could stand, but the men of the Third Brigade, in experience, morale, and resourcefulness, were first-rate soldiers like their fighting commander. In the three offensives under the leadership of General Ely, the brigade captured over seven thousand prisoners — three thousand more than any other brigade. In the words of General John A. Lejeune, this phenomenal success was "very largely due to the great qualities of leadership displayed by Brigadier General Ely."

Meanwhile, the battle of the Meuse-Argonne had entered its second phase — a month of continual bombardment, attack, and consolidation, as the American armies pushed forward from one objective to the next — steadily, inexorably. The Hindenburg Line had been broken in the first fierce rush in September, and on October 14th a general attack was launched on the Kriemhilde Stellung, the last strong line of the German defense.

In position before the Pultiere and Rappes woods was the Fifth Division, new to that sector and discouraged by three days of apparently aimless maneuvering and conflicting orders. But the men who wore the ace of diamonds on their shoulders were determined to prove their courage and ability. Though weary from loss of sleep and endless counter-marching, they went into battle with all the ardor of their

first charge, passed through the enemy barrage, moved steadily up the bare slopes of the hills, and advanced through the woods, exposed to withering machine-gun fire from three sides and the merciless hammering of the heavier guns from the galleries on the heights beyond. By night a handful of survivors reached the farther edge of Rappes woods and dug in. This was their destination. They had gone where they were told to go.

After three days of desperate fighting, nearly three-fourths of the rifle strength of the division had been spent. But the Aces were still holding the Pultiere woods on the morning of October 17th, when a big, blue-eyed man with a firm jaw and an air of confident determination, took command of the shattered division. It was Hanson E. Ely, recently commissioned major general. Four more days the Aces remained at the front, fighting stubbornly while their new commander coördinated the various units. Withdrawn for rest on October 22nd, the division absorbed three thousand replacements and, catching the spirit of their indomitable leader, went back into the line for a glorious share in the final drive which began on November 1st and ended with the armistice eleven days later.

With its right flank on the bank of the Meuse at Brioules, the Fifth pivoted to the right until the whole division faced the river above Dun-sur-Meuse. For two days the Aces were held on that shell-cursed western slope, while patrols searched in vain for a

crossing. By two o'clock on the morning of November 4th, the engineers, working between vicious bursts of machine-gun fire, had completed two foot bridges, but when the infantry tried to cross they were blown to pieces by the enemy. At nine thirty came an order from corps headquarters, "The crossing will be effected regardless of loss, as the movement of the entire Army depends upon this crossing, and it must be done at once."

At four o'clock in the afternoon an attempt to cross on pontoons at Clery-le-Petit was frustrated, but another party gained a foothold opposite Brioules and a battalion swam the icy river and canal just below. That night another battalion crossed and artillery bridges were built at Brioules. The next task was to take Dun-sur-Meuse.

"Take Dun-sur-Meuse and the hill north of 292, and from there go to the east. Do not wait for the other brigade", ordered General Ely. "Keep shoving your battalions through", he told another detachment. "Don't stop, but go through Dun. Take the shelling, and take the machine-gun fire, and push things along." And so Dun-sur-Meuse and the heights were taken that day. "This operation", declared General Pershing, "was one of the most brilliant military feats in the history of the American Army in France."

After the armistice the Fifth Division was included in the Army of Occupation and stationed in Luxembourg where the department of officers and

men in maintaining order received high praise. Having returned to the United States with his division in the summer of 1919, General Ely reverted to his former rank of colonel, but on March 5, 1921, was commissioned brigadier general and five months later was placed in command of the Post and General Service Schools at Fort Leavenworth. On February 2, 1923, he was made a major general in the regular army. During the four years from 1923 to 1927, he was Commandant of the Army War College. Since then he has served as Commanding General of the Second Corps Area with headquarters at Governors Island in New York.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS